

# ZILLAH

## *An Unusual Novelette*

By VALMA CLARK

MY FIRST intimation of Zillah Gruber, as I dozed there in the doorway over a cigarette, midway between the noisy, lighted cheer of the airless shack and the damp gloom of the equally airless July night, came in the clutch of a brown claw of a hand upon my dirt-caked shoe.

I started: "For the love of Pete—"

"You busy, Meester—Chuckles?"

"No—Oh, no."

"You say to come to you when I am afraid; I am afraid now." She had slid upon me out of the darkness and she crouched there, clinging to my shoe. Her ridiculous version of my nickname—something in the contrast it offered to her own sodden life—stabbed at my pity for her; and her appeal to my unfledged manhood was irresistible.

"It's that beast—Gruber again!" I cried.

"No, not him; worse than him. *Sh!* I show you." She stretched her body, which, in its miserable clothes, had always looked to me more like a lean and spiritless bag of old rags than anything human, to peer cautiously into the shack, where the men of our road gang were playing poker; her dark face was sallow with her fear. Now she extended a hand into the patch of yellow light from the door, revealed to me a twist of gay pink wrapping paper. "See!" Slowly she unfolded the paper.

I bent over it. She exerted the witch's power of mesmerism over me. I laughed aloud in my relief; I don't know what I had expected her to conjure up—some evil poison, perhaps, or one of her fearful gypsy charms; it was only a silver crescent, a single earring, of curious design and of quite barbaric size.

"It came—it came today. I have got it out of the mail in the village. It is from Tony; Tony has found me."

"Tony?"

"Tony Zack—my husband."

"But Gruber—I didn't know you'd been married before!"

"Tony is my husband. Joe Gruber—I have run away with him from Tony, six—seven years ago."

"Oh," I murmured inadequately.

"Tony search for me—six, seven years he search. He never give up. I know some day, sure, he finds me. Now—" Zillah's hand closed tight over the silver crescent as though the sight of it were too terrifying for her to bear.

"It comes down in the family," she continued; "the Zacks, they give it to you when they marry you, and it means you are good wife, true wife . . ."

"He's a gypsy too!" I said, for want of anything else to say.

"As gypsy as the ribs of God!" she answered proudly. "He keeps the other earring; it is his way of telling me he comes. Pretty . . . but they sag so heavy I was glad to leave them behind. . .

"A long time," she brooded. "Oh I know, Meester Chuckles"—sitting back on her heels she looked up at me curiously—"you think I am old. I am twenty-nine."

Why, she was only ten years older than I! It was incredible. I stared at her, the old, brown face, framed in untidy black hair of an oily straightness, with its deep lines dragging down to the drooped corners of her mouth: a face that expressed nothing so strongly as resignation and a shameful submission. An old, old woman, at twenty-nine! And yet an odd glitter in her black eyes, almost a wildness which I noticed before, challenged me at that moment.

But why—why—? A dozen questions came crowding to my lips. Why had she left her Tony in the first place? And why, by all things holy, had she stayed by Gruber if she was not bound to him? I could only sit and frown over her; I had no precedent, in all the range of my experience, by which I could understand the terrible thralldom of a Zillah Gruber. I thought of the college girls leading us fellows a merry chase, and of my mother whose word was law, over and above Dad's, in our house. My gosh!

"You were afraid of him, too—your—husband!" I tried.

"Yes. He would have killed me sometime."

"Just as you're afraid of Gruber."

"No, I hate him." She tried to express it, more to herself than to me: "Tony strikes me because he has a black temper, because he is mad with me. Joe—he strikes me because—because I am his woman, and it pleases him with himself—makes him feel the man . . ." Zillah's whole body drooped flaccidly with her shame.

"But Zillah, if it's a warning, why don't you clear out, leave 'em both flat?"

"No use; Tony follows always. Tony knows I belong to him—it is true of gypsy marriage. And Joe—Joe says I am his," she mumbled.

Well, of course, knowing Gruber, I could see that clash; when you hit Gruber in his sense of possession, you hit him hardest. But Zillah—she irritated me past bearing! That a woman should draw two such brutes must argue something against the woman herself, some appeal to brute nature. "Why do you stand it!" I burst out in a heat.

"Why?" Zillah looked at me blankly, then got wearily to her feet. "He comes back from town; I must go." She dropped the token down her dirty calico blouse, shuddered once convulsively. She concluded the business with a fatalistic and matter-of-fact prediction: "Tony comes all right. When he comes, he kills; he has the right to kill. You will see."

She turned, but, before she slid away into the night, she came back, close to me, with a sudden laughing animation.

"Look," she boasted, "sometimes I have fought back. Once I bit that Tony Zack until I saw the red blood come!"

She was gone then, off to the shell of an empty house, deeper in the hollow, which Gruber, as boss of the gang, had appropriated for himself. She had melted into the vague, pale mists that came in from the river. I, too, shuddered. It was a murky night: a night like Gruber himself, swollen, intruding . . .

### II

"HIGH you, Chuck Adams, come sit in on the game!" sang out Murphy from the tobacco-veiled interior.

They seconded him, Nowak, Cappello, and the others.

I wriggled out, but not before they had put in a curious question or two about "Old Shoe's" call upon me. It was their name for Zillah Gruber. "Himmel!" Lutz had once exploded, "she's an old shoe, that woman, for wearing and kicking about."

The appellation had stuck; it was used less contemptuously than pityingly. Chiefly it furnished a means of veiled allusion in Gruber's presence: was a part of the code against Gruber—grunts and syllables which could be uttered before Gruber and which Gruber wasn't in on—that secret code which develops inevitably under tyranny.

"Sure, I wish Maggie'd take half the lip off me that she takes off him!" growled Murphy. "But Maggie, I'm tellin' you boys—"

I wandered off by myself, away from their racket; I was still pondering Zillah Gruber. I recalled that memorable first meeting with her. It was my first Sunday with the gang, and I had been passing Gruber's place, where Zillah was hanging out clothes in the yard, when the boss came from the house in a fury. He was an unwashed, bulging creature in trousers and a pink undershirt; and he flourished in his hand a lavender-striped outer shirt, which was clearly a favorite with him, judging from the howling rage with which he displayed a bad scorch on its bosom. He had been going up to the village on a spree, but how could he go to town, on a Sunday, in a thing like that! He advanced on the woman, called her unprintable names. She cowered. Then he struck her—

According to every code I had ever known, there was only one thing to be done. He was a big man, but I tackled him in the orthodox fashion. It was a brief scrimmage, and—well, I came off alive. Gruber himself was laid up for two days, thanks not to me but to a bad heart. (I dreamed of it as a puffy old fungus of a heart, as unhealthy as the man himself.)

It was a good two days for the men—most of them had witnessed the fight from the shacks—and I was popular. Really, my row with Gruber was the thing that established me with the gang, and mighty lucky for me, considering my position as rank outsider. If, as professional laborers, they failed to see road-building in the light of a combination vacation and football training, at least they accepted me. They even listened to me with respect not due my years when I explained to them how I

had done scrub last year, but this year hoped to make the team; and they left me in peace when they grasped the fact that the "math" I was boning over was the only thing that stood between me and my coveted Team!

But to get back—I was now one with them: leagued with them against the boss, to grumble against him when he wasn't listening, to loaf on him when he wasn't looking, to put any little safe thing over on him on every occasion—but to break against him openly, in a big way, never! Their sympathy was all with me. Nevertheless, they predicted there would be the devil to pay when old Gruber found his feet again.

Nothing came of it. Why Gruber didn't fire me, I can't say, beyond the fact that I had got onto the gang through a certain drag with the superintendent.

Not that Gruber conciliated me at all. On the contrary, he now seemed to take a special delight in bullying Zillah in my presence. In me, Gruber had found some one to show; I became his chief audience, saw that enormous egotism of his at its thickest.

As for Zillah, she approached me where I was nursing a bad eye on the peaceful Sunday afternoon of the rumpus.

"You hurt?" She insisted upon bathing and bandaging the eye with a dirty strip of cloth; she knew what to do for black eyes—she was used to them.

"He's hurt, too?" I asked.

"Here—in the heart. It's why he's boss; he can't stand the digging. But he's hurt most in his—his big feeling of himself. You should not do it; you won't do it again—you promise? It's worse—he makes it up on me—"

That was the first time I posed my question: "But why do you stand it—why? He's no right to treat you so! Let me report him to the company—to the town authorities—"

"No."

I flung into my arraignment of him all the impatient, hot rebellion of my youth.

She opposed to me the dull passiveness of a servile womanhood, ages old in its habit of acceptance.

There was no stirring her. In the end she had my promise not to interfere again. She agreed to come to me in times of stress; she humored me to that extent. But I had established myself on a basis of confidential friendship with Zillah, and more and more, as the days went by, I became her outlet.

Yet, mulling over the enigma of Zillah Gruber there, reviewing my knowl-

edge of her from the beginning, I was shocked less by these definite, brutal clashes of her life than by the drab setting of it: a drabness that spread and penetrated like the dampness of the July night; a drabness with which that later drama, which was tied absurdly to the crescent earring, was soaked through and through. That people could live like the Grubers was a revelation to me—as much a revelation as the Dark Age slavery of Zillah herself.

There, in an abandoned frame house, they squatted. It was a house of wrecked windows, sad, peeling, with a bare dirt yard about it where chickens must once have scratched, but where no life existed now, not even chickens. You would have said it would be hard to find such a barren spot in this luxurious region of fruit and wheat and growing green things; indeed, it was as though the barren spot had prepared itself on purpose and had stood waiting for this sodden, hopeless couple to come to it.

Beyond and above were the shacks and the torn-up road. All day long, when the wind was that way—and it seemed always to be that way—the Gruber place was swept by the yellow sand of the road, until there was thick yellow coating over everything, like the coating of white lime that chalks the country about a limekiln: the very blades of grass, what few there were, hung heavy under their yellow dusting; it was a veritable desert oasis in a green country. There were no flowers—only the faded, dust-dimmed colors of sad clothes flapping on a line. It was tenement stuff against a farm background. As though the home touch which some women can bring even to a forlorn spot were reversed in Zillah's case, and she could bring only the tenement touch! That was odd, too, for Zillah had lived the life of the open roads, away from cities. But gypsy life, I've noticed, is not what it's cracked up to be; your gypsy camp is apt to be a nasty litter, a human mess, with the sordidness of it accentuated by its ideal setting. . . .

The house was, of course, unfurnished. The kitchen held the only furniture: a rusted stove, a table, a few chairs, some broken dishes, and a stewpan or two, mended by Zillah. It was there Zillah presided, not too cleanly—cooked for Gruber, stared out of the broken window. The roof leaked badly, and in rainy weather Gruber sat within and cursed while Zillah patiently set cans to catch the water. When it became too bad, he ensconced himself under a big yellow umbrella with an advertisement printed across it, and from there taunted Zillah and swore at her in comfort.

But in fair weather, in his off hours, Zillah was relieved of his presence. Gruber installed himself on the naked front porch, where, with his chair tilted against the wall, he held court. Usually he had a flask handy, so he achieved his audience. He boasted; the men listened—he was after all their boss. If Zillah showed herself, he liked nothing better than to abuse her before his men. The men did not ever interfere; their chivalry did not extend that far. Zillah was, you see, Gruber's woman. If another one had stepped in between the man and the woman, I have no doubt they would have cast their vote with her, to a man; as for starting anything themselves—it was beyond their creed. They made up to her by casting her a decent "Howdy, Sister!" when they passed her kitchen, and in their tone was a tacit recognition of the fact that she was with them, against Gruber.

I recall one such episode. The usual crowd lounged on the steps and Gruber himself, as usual, was going good, when Zillah came out to the pump. Now I think I have not spoken of Zillah's peculiar walk; but I shall have occasion to mention that again. She moved with a long masculine stride, which had somehow a little lilt to it, a half-skipping ecstasy: a gait ridiculous in such a miserable little figure, like hitching a light spring wagon onto an old, used nag. Pathetic too, for you knew instinctively that it was something copied—that the woman herself had never known the freedom which that gait expressed.

She came, with that peculiar swinging, lilting walk, and Gruber broke off a tale of himself to attack her: "Hangs t'you like a lock step! Can't ye shake it off? Then I'll shake it off for you! Walk, damn you, walk!"

Zillah curbed her stride, spilling water from the pail.

Bah! It was too much for me. I broke from Gruber's circle, reached Zillah, took the pail from her. Gruber's chuckle followed us to the kitchen.

My rage against him, against her for enduring it, gushed out over Zillah. She stilled me with a piece of coarse yellow cake; it required all of my concentration to remove from the cake the red ants, to which Zillah herself seemed indifferent.

### III

ZILLAH was always feeding me things which choked me, in return for the small services I rendered her. Her gratitude for my least attention was a part of her pathos.

Once, on the occasion of my birthday, she even presented me with a formal gift. I came upon her, working with hammer and knife on a flat rock by the kitchen. She was putting the finishing touches on an eccentric pin, which was made from a chicken bone mounted on tin.

"Tis good luck," she assured me, offering it to me shyly; "see—I wear one always"—she showed me the chicken-bone brooch at her breast.

I thought if my luck would be like hers, I shouldn't care for it, but I attempted the proper thanks. Zillah was modest: it was nothing; the Dad had been a tinker, and she had learned from him.

We spent some decent evenings together, Zillah and I, during Gruber's frequent absences in the village. Hunched up on the kitchen door step, I strummed tunes on my ukulele for Zillah, and sometimes surprised in her a little lift of spirit—a something to match that glitter I had seen in her black eyes. It was fun; too, to see her pleasure over the trifles which I picked up for her in the village dry goods store.

I remember one of those evenings when Gruber intruded. I had brought Zillah, from the Greek shop, a box of chocolates *de luxe*, tied up with a lurid yellow satin ribbon. She had pounced upon the gaudy ribbon with delight; there in my presence, before Gruber's shaving mirror, had unpinned her black hair, and achieved a fearful headdress. Curlyenes and spit curls and writhing, thin loops of braid, with the yellow ribbon threaded in: it was like nothing I had ever seen in civilization, but it seemed to please her. My fingers caught up the chords of a gay college song, and I sang the words:

"*Oh, the bold dandelion, oh, the brave dandelion . . .*"

Zillah's toes, in their old cracked shoes, caught up the tune, and, snapping her fingers, she took a few dance steps, as though to the click of castanets. She was no longer the cowed, spent creature; her face, beneath the yellow ribbon, was still sallow, old, but I had never seen such a snapping, brittle fire in it. Now she broke off laughing, to cram a whole chocolate into her mouth, and she was chewing it luxuriously like a large cud of tobacco, when Gruber walked into the kitchen.

The effect upon Zillah was as though a heavy, wet blanket had been pressed over the flame of her; she simply fizzled out, died.

Gruber tweaked at the yellow ribbon in her hair with his thick fingers. Fail-

ing to elicit any resistance from her, he jerked at a lock of the hair itself. Apparently Zillah had not even the life to remove herself from his path. Now his eye fell upon the candy box on the table. Gruber laughed: it pleased him, enhanced his own feeling of power, that others should pay tribute to the woman whom it was his privilege to mistreat. He lunged for the box, balanced it in his hand, and then deliberately, still chuckling, poured out the chocolates onto the filthy floor.

In that moment I could have murdered him cold; I could have strangled Zillah for her listlessness under his insults. I stood panting, my fists tight with my desire. But Zillah, from the floor where she was already patiently picking up the chocolates, shook her head at me.

"Get out, please," she murmured. When I rebelled, she rose, pressed me firmly out of the door, and shut it in my face. She simply sent me home, like a small boy.

The little gallantries which others showed to Zillah tickled Gruber, but let anyone other than himself disparage her—that was a different story! I had seen them walking down the village street together. Zillah, sharp and little and brown, a kind of scarecrow figure, with that absurd gait of hers which amounted almost to a deformity, inevitably drew titterings and the gibes of certain bolder small boys. But Gruber turned on the offenders with a snarl and a growl; chest swollen, he stalked along by the woman, guarding her: the snickers might have been directed at him personally.

Zillah's reaction was odd, for she shrank, not from their mockery, but from Gruber himself. She moved along at his side, her head lowered, humiliated to the dust. Gruber's cruelty to her she could stand, but his protection of her she could not endure; it was somehow the climax of her subjection to him, the fine feathers of her shame. She objected not to his abuse, but to his exclusive privilege of abuse.

Come to think of it, Gruber's championing of Zillah was, in a way, the final measure of his bullying, male egotism. The egotism of a man who is proud of his wife's beauty is one thing; but the egotism of a man who is proud of a poor specimen of a woman just because she belongs to him, is a bit thicker. As though Gruber's mere ownership of a thing were sufficient guarantee of it . . . as though the very socks he wore became royal wool for being against his shins . . .

Not that Zillah was subtle, but in her heart she felt this; she felt it very

clearly, I knew, from a remark she once made to me about Gruber's maimed left hand. "Doovel," she said, "that Gruber—that hand of his with the finger gone—it's still better than the hands of other people, only because it's his hand!"

All these old fragments and snatches of Zillah I had pieced together into a clear picture of her. But as I slept that night, in the heavy air, among the snores of the men, my picture dwindled and tapered off to a single sharp vision of a crescent earring. That, in turn, splintered into a dozen chips, which were somehow the signs of the zodiac: bulls and crabs and scorpions running wild. . . . Now a man with black mustaches flourishing a knife curved like a new moon. . . . I awoke shuddering with the sense of impending disaster.

## IV

**H**E would kill her for her faithlessness when he came, Zillah had stated. But it was absurd, I argued: killing wasn't so easy; besides, the importance Zillah attached to a mere trifling earring was ridiculous. To Zillah, however, it was not absurd. She was in dead earnest. She lived with her fate—wore the symbol of it, a scratch of pink paper, against her shriveled breast, and wore the look of it in her black eyes. Not for an instant, in the two weeks that elapsed before that amazing climax of Zillah's life, was I allowed to forget it.

On the last Saturday evening which I spent with Zillah, I went down into the hollow to find her bent over a pack of greasy cards. She was hunched up at one end of the table, from which the dirty dishes had been shoved back, and by the light of a vilely smoking kerosene lamp, she was spreading out the cards, fan-wise, before her and muttering something like an incantation.

"Whew," I gasped, turning down the wick of the lamp and throwing wide the door, "a little air in here! He's gone!"

"He go soon, but you stay, anyhow," Zillah answered, scarcely looking up. She was wholly absorbed in her cards, frowning over them, mumbling to herself. "I no understand . . . Tony kills me, but the cards, they say . . ."

Gruber, togged out in a red necktie and a pink shirt, his hat over one eye, swaggered through on his way to the village. He was in high good humor with himself. "Lord, tea leaves, and nickels in water, and now cards! What's the big idea? I have it"—Gruber swung his leg over the table—"you can just tell my fortune before I step out—huh?"

"No." Zillah's two hands covered her cards.

"Yes, I say. Come along, shoot!"

"No." But in Zillah's eyes grew a little speculative interest, an odd curiosity; clearly the idea of looking into Gruber's future intrigued her. "Well then, if I dukker for you, may the blame of it hang on your own head."

Slowly she arranged her cards, monotonously she began her chant: "I see a journey—a far black journey. I see a stranger—a black stranger—an' he bring luck . . . is it bad luck? I see—"

"Tryin' to scare me, old woman! But just remember, my luck's your luck!"

"Not so sure," muttered Zillah. She was staring up at Gruber now, and her eyes held their curious sparkle. "Do I—go on?"

"Go on!"

"I see—I see a black cloud—the death cloud—"

"To hell with your lucks an' your witch's charms!" he snarled, scattering the cards with a sweep of his thick hand. "Want to spoil my celebration, eh? Well, you can't! See—you can't scare me—Joe Gruber—with your spells and your curses, you old hag, you old devil-ridden—"

There was more of it. Then Gruber pulled himself together, proved his fearlessness by the air with which he adjusted red carbuncle cuff buttons and tipped his hat still further over his eye. He stepped jauntily into the night.

Zillah, her forefinger crooked on the king of spades, ruminated: "The cards, they never lie to me . . . You better have good time, Joe Gruber, while you can . . ."

Now her hand twisted at her breast. She took out the crescent earring, dangled it before her; her black eyes were inscrutable. She hooked the earring in place, and it dragged at the withered lobe of her ear. Before the mirror, she appraised herself, and her face, like a pucker brown cork, was yet not lacking in a certain coquetry. She moved her head, watched the crescent dance and send out silver gleams; she twisted from her hips, studied her whole body, as much of it as was visible in the mirror. She was like a grotesque caricature of a pretty girl whom I had once caught preening before a looking-glass on Prom night,

That was on Saturday. On Monday occurred the one little episode which prepared me at all for the astounding Zillah I was to see: the only forewarning of that sudden freak of her mind and

nerves and that lightning-flash of her spirit. I have said that Zillah was meek with an irritating meekness; I have intimated that, if she was kicked, you had a sneaking feeling she was meant to be kicked. Yet I'm afraid, for the sake of the drama, I've shown Zillah at her highest moments; that I've made something more of her than the monotone of submission which she really was. Mostly Zillah was simply dead wood. I give you my word for it, she was a mere thing, a chattel, expressing nothing more lively than a passive adaptation.

But on Monday noon, when Zillah came with Gruber's dinner pail, I saw in her a spark. As she approached, a dog ran from a farmhouse, and snarled, and would have bitten her. I jumped up; two or three other men jumped up. But Gruber was ahead of us. He tackled the dog, gave us an exhibition of vicious temper; in fact, lamed the beast with his heavy shoes. It was the sort of brutality that made him popular in that neighborhood, quite aside from the stories of him that went about!

But Zillah—her face was the thing that caught me: it expressed no fear of the dog, no fear of Gruber, but only a blazing fury of hatred for him. This was the one act even approximating a kindness which Gruber had performed for her, and yet it was the moment at which she hated him hardest.

Afterward Gruber picked up his dinner pail. It contained a slab of the breaded meat which he disliked, and he actually threw it at Zillah. She accepted that insult sluggishly.

But later, when she returned to the house with his empty pail, I followed her, and I saw her fling down the dinner pail and stamp on it in a futile gust of passion. I could only stare.

"Why?" I asked her.

"Why—why! That man—that Gruber—I am not myself, I am his. You have seen it! Can nothing touch me then without touching him, too? If sharp little teeth stick into me, then must they also stick into him? Can't I feel nothing—nothing"—Zillah hammered at her breast—"but what he lets me feel? Bah, just a mercury for his weather . . . a ruler to measure his feeling for himself. That thick, puffy feeling—that man's feeling of himself—ugh! I tell you, it is like a dough around me—it smothers me—" Zillah's face was sick with her utter loathing of him, of herself; she covered it from me.

After a time she took up the tin pail, attempted to straighten it, went listlessly on down.

## V

IT was on the very next evening—Tuesday, July the eighteenth, as we all had occasion to remember—that the final catastrophe occurred. One of the gang brought back the news of a band of gypsies camping over by the river. Another—Murphy, it was—came up from the village bearing word of a stranger with a peculiar sloping, lilting stride.

"Devil take me," he swore, "if this fellow isn't the Gruber woman all over again; their two walks match like—like cotton off the same bolt!"

I put two and two together. I ought to warn Zillah. But at that instant a fearful commotion started down in the Gruber shack. The night was still, glamorous with a full moon; now all its beauty was shattered by that Tin Pan Alley clatter. Coarse oaths . . . and falling furniture . . . soft whimpering, like a child's. It was the end with me. I'd do more than whisper a warning to Zillah. I'd bust in and shout a challenge to Gruber, if it was my last act on earth! I'd have that beast in jail for wife-beating . . . I swore it!

I started down on the run. At the very door step I rammed, head on, into the stranger. He stared at me full for a second, and I had an impression of a swarthy, handsome boldness and contempt. Then he pushed me aside with a sharp, "My business—you keep out!" and entered.

He moved with a rhythm. He was swift, sure danger, like a panther. He was alive, as thick old Gruber had never been; and I could see how a fellow like this would get into your blood—how he would swing himself into your walk and how, having known him, you would carry that exuberant mark of him as long as you lived. For a moment he stood by Gruber, looking down at Zillah, who was shrunk against the wall; Gruber was a sodden lump, a pale, thick cheese of a man beside him.

Then Zillah saw him. Her eyes dilated, and her hand went up to her rropy throat. "Tony!" she whispered.

Gruber had dropped away, and they confronted each other, the two of them. Zillah crouched lower. She was a figure study in Fear; her face wore the look of a coward woman whose hour had come. She had never looked scrannier, meaner, uglier, this little dark woman, than she looked at that instant. In spite of my pity for her, I felt a shuddering aversion to her; I thought that the handsome Tony knew the same contempt of her.

"You know why I come!"

"Y-yes." Zillah's terror was the sharpest feeling I had ever seen in her: her face was all tight—screwed up—with it.

"Bah, you—you—!" He advanced a lithe step upon her.

Zillah could not have moved.

But now, with a bellow of righteous rage, Gruber came into it; Gruber's male ownership, the very core of his pride, was challenged.

"You Tony Zack—she's mine, you hear!—mine!"

Scuffle of feet . . . splintering of a bad floor board . . . crash of a breaking dish. Now they were on the floor in a close grapple . . . now on their feet again, rocking together.

It was a pleasant little scramble, a pleasant thing they were scrambling for: one man fighting for the right to kill her, the other for the right to keep her as a target for his moods and a gauge for himself; each of them fighting for the right to whip her after his own individual manner. It was humorous, also, these two strapping men quarreling over this little rag of a woman: not a real woman, but just a symbol—a symbol to one of a faith broken, to the other of a thing owned.

And yet—I don't know what it was that brought me back, in the heat of the battle, to Zillah. Zillah had come alive; she was breathing again and she was following the fight keenly. The glitter was in her eye, and her hatred of Gruber had wiped out all her fear of Tony. She was watching—watching—

Now Gruber was on top in the battle, swelling to his victory. Zillah sickened: it was as though she wallowed in the thick paste of his egotism; as though that immense egotism of possession were about her in folds and layers, shutting her in, choking her. She pushed it off with her two hands. She was shaken by a writhing convulsion. She was fighting for her very life.

Now she had risen behind Gruber's triumphant back, and with her hands she clutched a chair. For a moment she faltered. She was measuring them—Gruber's egotism, stifling her, against Tony's sharp fury, knifing her . . . She was weighing her fear against her utter loathing. But what was a healthy fear compared to this other thing she felt? Better the sudden stab of a knife than that slow smothering—letting his egotism feed and grow, feed and grow on her—

Zillah's shrunken body began to straighten.

"Ha!" gloated Gruber, "I'll show you—"

Zillah stood tall now, and taut. She raised the chair—she raised it high—and she brought it down with a really terrible force upon Gruber's head. For an instant Gruber sagged . . . the swollen bravado of him went down, like air escaping from a leaking balloon. Then he toppled.

It was a rather awful silence. I remember admiring Zillah because she did not herself collapse: she was splendid, and I wanted to cheer for her—a regular razzle-dazzle, three hips! I was also acutely aware of a tipped-up can of bacon grease, which had spilled out and hardened over the stove. A rotten housekeeper, Zillah. . . .

Tony Zack looked up at Zillah from where he had been listening at Gruber's body. "His heart's stopped," he stammered.

"It would stop," she answered distinctly.

They stared at each other, and there was no contempt for her on the man's face now.

Zillah made the first move. "You get out!" she commanded him harshly. "This is my kill. The men, they come." There was no disobeying her in her present mood, and besides, Tony Zack seemed half-paralyzed.

"Oh, 'tis you, Chuckles! You shut up tight your mouth—you hear me?" And Zillah, standing alone, head up, faced the men proudly as they came running.

## VI

THE rest is anticlimax. The others—Murphy, Lutz, Gottovi—have criticized Zillah for not living up to the magnificent break for freedom which she made on that night. I don't see it that way myself. It isn't everyone makes a touchdown every game; it's something to have made one touchdown, even if you never pull another. However—

As luck had it, the village happened to be the county seat and the trial was scheduled quickly, so that August saw the whole business through. Naturally, in that neighborhood, popular feeling ran with Zillah: a matter of self-defense, combined with the accident of his weak heart. It was easy enough to establish his abuse of Zillah: every mother's son of us, we testified as to Gruber's brutal treatment of her; moreover, Zillah herself had come off from that last encounter with him bearing the marks of a bad threshing.

Now after Zillah's release came a brief period of a strange blossoming. I've heard of people who desire to be loved for themselves alone; but Zillah, having

## ZILLAH

given up all hope of love from the world, asked only to be despised for herself alone. She flaunted that odd gait of hers down the street; she seemed to invite the laughter of the village folk, and to thrive on the occasional snicker of a small boy that trailed her. It was as though, through these harsh contacts, she gained a heady sense of her own freedom. At this time she was living alone back in the old Gruber house, and she was something of a camp charge.

But our responsibility toward her was of short duration. The sequel was, I suppose, inevitable, and yet I was totally unprepared for it. I had seen Tony Zack several times—once or twice at the trial—and I knew that the gypsies were still hanging about.

Tony did not come again to the Gruber place; he hated and shunned the haunt of the *gorgio*—the non-gypsy—Zillah informed me. Zillah had visited several times at the gypsy camp, but

that seemed to me natural. No, I had no warning beyond a certain new and puzzling remoteness in Zillah herself. Why she did not tell me, I can't say, unless she was ashamed of her weakness.

On a morning of orange sunrise in mid-September, our early breakfast was interrupted by a procession of three canvas-topped vans which invaded our unfinished road.

"Heigh," shouted Murphy, "you can't go no further there! Road's closed."

We loafed out of the mess hall.

A woman had climbed down from the front van, which was painted a lurid yellow, and was calmly removing the wooden horses that barred the way.

"Heigh there!" bellowed Murphy again. "You can't—"

"Mein Gott, it's that Gruber woman—that Old Shoe!" exploded Lutz. "Off again with her gypsy first-love!"

"Zillah!" I called. "O Zillah—"

She turned, she paused uncertainly; but Tony Zack, from his seat on the wagon, jerked his head in peremptory command to her, and she crawled back to her perch beside him. The procession lurched on, took the first fork away from the forbidden road up over the hill. So Zillah passed beside Tony, the silver crescents dangling at her ears. She smiled back, but she did not even wave to me—perhaps Tony, with his hatred of the *gorgio*, had forbidden it.

"Can ye beat it?" wondered Murphy. "Out of the fryin' pan into the fire: sure, I'd trust Joe Gruber himself before that gypsy devil!"

The air was cool and pungent with the smell of goldenrod and blue asters; I thought, irrelevantly, of a thick, damp night in July. For an instant, before it dropped down out of sight, the yellow van was silhouetted against a bloody gash from the rising sun, like a clean, sharp wound.